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ABSTRACT

This document is designed to provide tutors, teachers, lecturers, and other supporters of online learners in the United Kingdom with ideas and suggestions for developing learners' online learning skills. The materials presented are based on the premise that learning skills are best developed in an environment that encourages active participation in learning, provides opportunities to apply developing skills and understanding, encourages reflection and learning from experience, and provides constructive feedback and support. The following are among the topics discussed in the individual sections: (1) the wide range of approaches, techniques, and methods covered by the term "online learning"; (2) responsibility; (3) self-management; (4) communication (e-mail, audio conferencing, video conferencing, assignments); (5) self-assessment; (6) working with others (the importance of developing communication, collaboration, and negotiation skills); (7) writing with a word processor; (8) reading and note taking; (9) research and searching skills (locating needed information and judging its quality); (10) analysis (ways various computer applications can help in analyzing quantitative and qualitative information); and (11) learning strategies. Short exercises are provided throughout the guide and are followed by discussions of the issues associated with the exercises. Lists of 22 suggestions, addresses of 7 contacts, and 21 publications are appended. (MN)

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Online Learning Skills

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Online Learning Skills

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NIACE has a broad remit to promote lifelong learning opportunities for adults. NIACE works to develop increased participation in education and training. It aims to do this for those who do not have easy access because of barriers of class, gender, age, race, language and culture, learning difficulties or disabilities, or insufficient financial resources.

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1 How to use this guide

The guide's intention is to provide you with ideas and suggestions for developing online learning skills with your learners. It is intended for tutors, teachers, lecturers and supporters of learners.

The guide has been written in an open learning style. Short exercises have been provided throughout the material and I would encourage you to attempt as many as you are able. Each exercise is followed by a discussion where I have tried to provide you with an overview of the issues associated with the exercise. There are no right or wrong answers since your context may be quite different from the ones provided in this publication. An indication of the time each exercise will take is given alongside each question.

It is important to remember that learning skills are best developed in an environment that:

- encourages active participation in learning;
- provides opportunities to apply developing skills and understanding;
- encourages reflection and learning from experience;
- provides constructive feedback and support.

Individuals have different preferences and need to be comfortable with the methods and skills that are being suggested to them. They need encouragement to try new approaches in an environment that is free of blame and with appropriate support.

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2 Introduction

This guide is intended to help tutors, trainers, teachers and other supporters of learners who are seeking to assist them to develop online study and learning skills. Online skills clearly have a relationship with more general study skills. However, the nature of the computer and online environment produces significant changes. The computer is potentially very beneficial to a learner.

For example

Word-processing	–	allows notes and assignments to be efficiently and effectively revised and improved;
	–	can help students to improve the presentation of their work using spelling and grammar checkers.
Spreadsheets	–	provide the means to analyse numerical information and to present it effectively (e.g. charts, graphs and tables).

The online environment also provides many potential benefits in that it provides the learner with considerably more freedom to study:

- when they want;
- where they want;
- at the pace they want.

However, taking advantage of these benefits requires learners to have a variety of skills. Some of these skills are similar to those required to study in other environments and can be transferred or modified to the new situation. Making a successful transfer requires learners who are:

- aware of their existing skills;
- understand what they need to achieve;
- understand the requirement of the course or how to use the learning materials.

Online learning methods are not perfect: they have a mixture of strengths and weaknesses and it is important that learners gain an appreciation of their nature. This will allow them to recognise and judge their own efforts.

An important issue which several surveys and investigations have identified is that learners are often frustrated by technical problems. It is therefore vital that technical support is available. Due to the nature of online learning this means that it has to be in place 24 hours a day, seven days a week and every day of the year if possible. Technical difficulties can distract learners and prevent them from developing their learning skills and being successful learners.

Exercise 1

What are online learning skills? **Duration 30 minutes**

Consider your own experience of online learning and tutoring. What are the main groups of online learning skills?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

There are many ways of expressing the groups of skills required for successful online learning but they are likely to include:

- self-management – taking responsibility for your own learning. This may be called time management or just acceptance of responsibility;
- communication skills – this includes writing using word-processors, e-mails; using audio and video conferencing; reading information on the screen; communicating with a group of learners; developing assignments;
- self-assessment – being able to judge your own progress. This is a critical skill in all forms of distance learning;
- online group working – learning as part of a collaborating group. Working with others is an important skill which distance makes especially difficult;
- research skills – how to find relevant content on the World Wide Web - searching skills;
- analysis of online content – judging the value of web content;
- learning strategies – how to approach online learning in an effective way;
- computer skills – a wide range of application skills and knowledge such as word-processing, using a browser and search engines.

Developing effective learning skills is essential for a learner's confidence and success. They are probably best developed as part of a course of study that do not concentrate on learning skills, although elements such as word-processing may be best learned on a specialist programme. A separate learning skills module is unlikely to be popular and may be seen as an additional barrier. It is probably best practice to integrate learning skills development within a course that the individuals are motivated to study.

3 What is online learning?

Online learning covers a wide range of approaches, techniques and methods. These include:

- simple delivery of the learning materials to the learner (i.e. the learner downloads the package and either works interactively with it on their own computer or prints out the material and takes the paper away with them);
- lecture notes and visual aids being placed on the web, Intranet or network to aid students;
- using the World Wide Web as a library of resources (e.g. electronic journals, online databases, reports and references) through which learners browse and locate what they need;
- communication link between student and tutor;
- communication link between learners to provide mutual support (e.g. conferences, mail groups and bulletin boards);
- communication link between tutors so they can assist each other;
- 'frequently-asked questions' web sites;
- interactive learning on-line (i.e. learner interacts with a package at a remote location);
- computer learning environments which provide many different resources to assist the learner;
- computer-assisted assessment;
- virtual seminars and conferences;
- video conferencing to provide face-to-face support to learners in remote locations.

Online learning is a fast-developing area so that new approaches are being tried continuously and many combinations and permutations of methods are being developed. Often online methods are integrated with traditional learning methods.

Exercise 2

Online learning approach **Duration 20 minutes**

Consider your own situation and identify one approach to online learning. For your selection, produce a list of the learning skills required for the learner to be able to study effectively.

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

Communicating with a tutor using e-mail

This involves the learner being:

- a confident user of ICT and e-mail;
- able to produce short clear and concise messages;
- organised to check their e-mail regularly and reply to any messages received.

Even a straightforward task such as using e-mail requires a considerable degree of skill. The learner must be able to access the e-mail application on a computer. This may involve:

- switching on a computer;
- loading the e-mail application (e.g. Microsoft Outlook);
- accessing the inbox to locate e-mail messages;
- reading, replying, and sending e-mail;
- opening attachments;
- writing and sending new e-mails to single and multiple addresses;
- linking attachments to new e-mails;
- writing clear and concise messages which conform to acceptable standards;
- understanding the nature of e-mail: recipients may not read your message for several days while it always feels that it will be read as soon as the message is sent.

4 Responsibility

All forms of open and distance learning place additional responsibilities on learners. This is due to many factors but in particular to the absence of direct face-to-face contact with tutors and other learners. Tutors will normally remind learners of deadlines and provide them with lots of hints and tips to help them succeed while their fellow learners provide considerable informal help.

In online learning e-mail, chat rooms and conferencing do help to bridge this gap but all rely on the learner being proactive to a considerable extent. They need to check their mail regularly and if they are part of a group activity they must be willing to compromise over their own preferences in ways and times of working.

In all forms of open and distance learning it is easier to fall behind, to defer working on an exercise or simply for the learner to lose their way. This is due to many different factors but in particular the isolation of the learner. It is vital that, where possible, online learners are able to set their own pace and to accept responsibility for achieving their learning objectives. This will require time to develop so that for new online learners it probably will require tutors to be more proactive in contacting learners to ensure they are making progress. However, it is important not to develop a culture of dependence. The tutors must strike a balance between assisting learners to take responsibility and taking over the responsibility from them.

Exercise 3

Acceptance of responsibility **Duration 20 minutes**

How would you start the process of developing an acceptance of responsibility in new online learners?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

There is a wide range of possibilities, but one issue remains central. That is, to accept responsibility you must give responsibility. It is therefore important in all parts of online learning to explain individual responsibilities and to give individuals responsibility to complete particular tasks.

In a collaborative learning exercise, it is often useful to provide each learner with individual roles such as:

- chair
- note taker
- researcher – responsible for finding information about X
- researcher – responsible for finding information about Y
- progress chaser

An alternative is to ask the group to decide on roles. In any case, provide a clear explanation of each role's objectives and timetable for completing the task. When the group task is completed, provide feedback, not only on the outcome, but also on each person's role.

Developing an acceptance of responsibility is not a short-term objective. It is likely to take a long time, but it is helped by:

- a clear statement of individual responsibilities;
- clear timescales;
- good feedback.

5 Self-management

All forms of open and distance learning require learners to manage their own learning. Online learning is not different in requiring learners to manage their time, effort and planning. It is different from other forms of learning in that it is not always easy to determine when you are studying and when you are not. Traditional courses provide learners with a detailed structure and timetable. It is clear to the learner that they are in a classroom taking part in a learning experience. When learners are using communication technology to access learning then it is largely the individual's choice when they start studying and equally when they stop. It is very easy for them to carry on studying for too long so that they become tired and ineffective.

Learners need to be able to plan their learning to take advantage of the freedom that online learning provides them in combination with good learning practice. There are many practical issues for online learners to consider, including:

- establishing a good pattern/structure to individual learning (e.g. neither too much nor too little) which takes into account their domestic situation;
- making sure family and friends realise when they are studying. This can be difficult if the computer is in a communal living area or if the family have small children. They need to create a learning environment which allows them to study effectively;
- knowing when to stop – there are many stories of learners working on for many hours. They need to realise that effective learning requires learners who are alert, aware and awake. It is easy to lose track of time when working online so that it is good practice to use an alarm clock to remind learners how long they have been studying. Many people find reading text on the screen to be tiring and a cause of eye strain.

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Exercise 4

Self-management **Duration 20 minutes**

How would you help learners to develop effective self-management practices?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

One approach is to suggest to learners that they construct a study timetable for themselves and monitor their online work over a week or two in order to check if it is realistic. This will need to be accompanied by an example timetable and suggestions for good practice (e.g. length of study periods, regular checking of e-mail and so on) so the learners understand what they are trying to achieve. This timetable should also cover the learners' wider activities such as caring for their children, jobs. Hopefully this will help the learners produce realistic timetables. Tutors need to be aware that people tend to assume they can do more than is possible and also that tasks can be achieved quicker than is normally possible.

Constructing a study timetable is a useful outcome but it also needs to be linked to learners planning what they will study as well as when they will study. They need to be aware that leaving work on an assignment to the last minute is poor practice. They need to be able to judge how long different tasks will take and include this type of assessment in their plan.

Many learners find that they are unable to prioritise and this frequently makes them do the work in the wrong sequence. It is useful to encourage learners to produce 'To Do Lists' for each week so that they are continuously reviewing their priorities.

There are several electronic diaries or time management systems available. It may be useful to encourage online learners to use one since they can be encouraged to check it each time they begin a study session. In effect, they will be reviewing their plans continuously. If a system is provided as part of the course then it will facilitate sharing plans when working in a collaborative learning group.

6 Communication

E-mail

The use of e-mail has rapidly grown in all education and training sectors and is often reported as a major reason for using the Internet by both individuals and organisations. E-mail is often compared with the telephone but has significant differences. Some differences are:

- almost all adults have used the telephone extensively while many adults have never sent an e-mail;
- telephone is a synchronous medium in that it involves a dialogue where both participants are taking part at the same time. E-mail is asynchronous so participants are not taking part at the same time;
- telephone normally involves just two people while e-mail can involve many participants;
- telephone conversations are normally not recorded but e-mail provides a permanent record;
- telephone involves speech while e-mail requires written communication;
- telephone conversations are often able to diagnose and solve problems while e-mail's strength is the ease of asking questions and sending short comments. It is not strong on a dialogue leading to problem identification.

This comparison illustrates the learning need. E-mail is the main method of online learning communication so requires highly skilled learners who understand the nature of the medium. The ease of sending an e-mail can lead to learners reacting to stimulation without careful thought. This can result in arguments between learners and tutors. It is important to agree a code of conduct (i.e. Netiquette) for learners and tutors.

Audio conferencing

If a learner has never used a microphone to take part in an audio conference it can be a frightening and nerve-wracking experience. It is difficult to know when to contribute and when to listen. It is also difficult to know who has made a contribution. In a face-to-face meeting you have all the visual clues to know when to speak so you avoid interrupting others. Equally you are aware what the impact your own contribution is having because you can see the reactions of the other members of the group.

An effective contribution to an audio conference requires:

- a careful consideration of what the learner wants to say
- a determined effort to listen to the contribution combined with taking notes so that they can produce a record of the key points of the meeting

Video conferencing

Video conferencing can provide a very anxious initial experience. Learners are often unsure how to behave, what to say or when to say it. The quality of the image can be variable and it requires a leader to control the event when multiple learners at different sites are involved.

Learners may find themselves waiting for the tutor if he/she is involved with another person. Tutors are often faced with trying to divide his/her attention between several people. This is very difficult and can be stressful.

Video conferences can provide an effective means of taking part in learning events without the stress of travelling, and offer the opportunity to both see and hear experts. Many USA state health services offer video conferencing training to update professional staff skills in the workplace through contact with leading authorities in their subjects.

Assignments

In all forms of distance learning it is important for tutors to provide feedback to their learners about any assignments. This is often provided using methods such as the Reviewing functions provided in Microsoft Word, which allow you to insert comments in a written electronic document. This is a powerful feature and allows a tutor to provide linked feedback with the learner's work. However, it does assume that the learners understand this approach and are able to access and understand this form of comment.

Exercise 5

Code of conduct **Duration 15 minutes**

What would you include as a code of conduct for using e-mail?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

The way that learners behave to each other and their tutors is important in all forms of learning. However, when you are communicating using a method that hides the person's tone of voice or body language it is easy to misunderstand their meaning and to produce conflict. This makes codes of conduct important.

A code of conduct or "netiquette" could include:

1. Not forgetting to use 'please' and 'thank you' no matter how brief the message
2. Being ready to say you are sorry if you have misunderstood a message
3. Never being offensive to another participant
4. Being careful how you criticise another person's work
5. Remembering that you do not know what pressures or stresses the reader or previous sender is under

Learning is often associated with debate and discussion which is valuable but also liable to create conflict and argument at times even when it is undertaken face-to-face. This does not aid learning. The risks of conflict are higher with e-mail.

7 Self-assessment

It is very important in any learning situation to be able to judge your own progress. In an online environment, this is especially important since you will probably never meet your tutor or fellow students face-to-face. This then removes the many informal occasions when you can compare yourself with your peers and gain informal feedback from the tutor. It is far easier in a face-to-face situation to ask your peers whether they understand a subject, than to send them an e-mail, especially at the start of a course.

If the learners' previous experiences of education have been poor then often confidence is low so that even the smallest barrier to asking for feedback may prevent communication. It is an important part of the online tutor's role to remove these barriers and to help new learners to assess their own performance. Many learners will assume that they will be told by their tutor about their progress and that they have no personal role to play. Reviewing your own performance so that you are able to adapt your approach accordingly is an important element in all forms of distance learning.

A distant tutor may find it difficult to assess learners progress accurately so that their feedback may come too late to be helpful. Distance learning means they only see part of the learner's work (i.e. assignments, e-mails) while in a conventional classroom they can see and talk to the learner every session.

Exercise 6

Judge progress **Duration 15 minutes**

What methods would you suggest should be included in online learning so learners can judge their own progress?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

There is a variety of methods which learners can employ to help them to assess their own progress. These include:

- encouraging learners to discuss the course with their peers in a private environment such as a learner-only mailgroup;
- encouraging learners to discuss their progress with their tutor;
- providing model answers to all assignments to allow learners to compare their own work to the model. Model answers also provide learners with guidance on what the assignment requires from them;
- ensuring that tutor feedback is detailed, clear and comprehensive (e.g. assignments are annotated to help learners understand the strengths and weaknesses of their answers);
- encouraging tutors to be proactive and not simply react to learners;
- circulating average marks for assignments with comments on overall strengths and weaknesses of work;
- helping learners to establish support groups.

One of the aids to self-assessment is reflection. Many of the ideas listed will help a learner to reflect on their performance and progress. However, it is important for the online centre actively to encourage reflection by providing exercises and assignments which require the learner to reflect on their experience. Feedback and opportunities to discuss the learners' view and feelings need to be provided to maximise the benefits of the activities.

Asking learners to keep a diary of their learning experiences in which they review and reflect on what they have learnt, their experiences, progress and effort, may help them to develop their skills.

8 Working with others

An important part of online learning is working in collaboration with other learners. This places a significant responsibility on the learner to contribute to a group. In the face-to-face situation groupwork also poses a challenge for learners. However, there are additional pressures in online learning as the learners are provided with considerable choice about when they learn. This almost certainly results in the members of the group having different preferences about the pace and timing of group activities. Communications are often concentrated around e-mail which is an asynchronous method, so that discussion can be a lengthy process and it is often impossible for participants to know who has read their messages. Learners can become frustrated waiting for other participants to respond.

Group activities often require a considerable range of skills to be demonstrated. Almost all these skills are developed through practical experience so again for learners who have returned to studying after a long break, collaborative activities can be very demanding. Some of the key skills required for collaborative work are:

- communication – writing short focused e-mail messages;
- collaboration – respecting the other participants' study preferences;
- responsibility – accepting that you need to contribute to the success of the group and ensuring your actions do not hinder the group (e.g. delivering work on time);
- negotiating – agreeing a timetable, methods and objectives.

Collaborative work can be very rewarding but it can also be very annoying. Many learners will have doubts at some time about why they are working on a group project which they feel they could often do quicker and better on their own. However, when it all works it helps learners to develop the skills listed above. Collaborative learning can be very satisfying and often people learn more about the issues being discussed and explored this way than they could possibly achieve on their own.

Exercise 7

Collaboration **Duration 20 minutes**

How do you help learners work in collaboration with others and understand why it is important?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

There are three main reasons for groupwork. These are:

- Collaborative work can help learners to explore the task from many different angles – far more than they could do on their own;
- Collaborative work assists learners to develop many useful skills;
- Communication can be practised in a concentrated way so participants can develop the skill of writing clear, concise e-mails and also understand the nature of e-mail (e.g. time lags between responses and the non-linear nature of e-mail).

In order to encourage collaborative work, you need to provide suitable tasks/exercises/assignments. These are tasks which require more than a single individual's effort to be successfully completed. It is important to provide clear statements of the task and to identify roles for each member of the group to undertake (e.g. Chair, time keeper, researcher). This will help people to collaborate. Sometimes new groups will take a long time simply identifying what to do and how to do it. If time is not important, then forming/organising a group can be a useful learning experience for participants.

Tutors need to check on the progress of collaborative working groups to assist with group formation and to resolve any problems. Frustration and disagreement can more easily occur, when trying to co-operate at a distance than with the equivalent face-to-face group.

The time required to complete an exercise is significantly longer with an online group, so it is important to set realistic timescales.

9 Writing with a word-processor

Computer applications provide powerful aids to all learners in that they can improve:

- presentation (e.g. layout, illustrations and so on);
- spelling;
- grammar;
- editing (e.g. it is easy to revise a word-processed document).

Online learners need to be competent users of applications such as word processing, spreadsheets, paint and compression applications. This is mainly due to the need to send assignments using communication technologies (e.g. e-mail attachments) or to work with other learners on a joint document. Modern word processors provide a range of functions which can aid this process.

Learners need to be able to:

- use the full range of standard functions (e.g. cut and paste, bold, underline, italics, undo/redo, change fonts and character sizes;
- track changes to a document;
- add notes;
- insert illustrations in documents;
- draw a table;
- draw illustrations using applications such as Microsoft Paint;
- insert files in documents;
- change file formats – this can be very useful to ensure that all members of a learning group can read the document;
- compress files to make them smaller. If you send a document containing illustrations it can be very large which will make it slow to download over a telephone line into a person's house. Learners are not pleased if a file takes an hour to download if they are paying the telephone bill.

10 Reading and note-taking

Text is still the main method of communicating with the learner although more often attention is given to graphics, video or other forms of multimedia. Reading text displayed on a screen is more difficult than reading a book or other papers.

Learners often print web pages in order to read them on paper so the display needs to be designed to be read both on the screen and as a printout. It is difficult to judge whether learners will prefer to read the text on screen or on a printout. In either case learners need to read actively with a clear intention to identify what is important and to relate the information to other issues they have previously studied.

People's attention span is often short when reading screens and it is often preferable to print out the information to read later. However, the risks are that the learner simply files the print-out without studying it and that they amass an impressive set of print-outs that have never been read. Note-taking is an effective way of helping learners concentrate on the information by putting it into their own words. Note-taking also includes using a highlight pen on a print-out or annotating it with the learner's own comments. In all cases, the key is helping them to understand the content and also to provide aids for revision.

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Exercise 8

Presenting text **Duration 20 minutes**

Identify a series of guidelines for presenting text on a web site

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

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Discussion

Presenting text on a website

Some people may find reading text on a computer screen more difficult than reading print on a page. This is largely due to the lower resolution of display on a computer screen. However, the quality of display is rapidly improving so people may become more willing to read large amounts of text on the screen.

Some key guides to helping the presentation of screen text are:

- use short lines (8-10 words);
- use short sentences;
- display text in small chunks with each one presenting a single idea or concept;
- double-space the text;
- avoid long sentences of text which you need to scroll down to read.

Exercise 9

Note-taking **Duration 30 minutes**

Identify a series of good practice guidelines for note-taking.

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

Good practice guidelines for note-taking

Learners studying from a book or other printed material are often encouraged to take notes, annotate the material or highlight key sections. This aids their learning since it assists them to identify the critical points in the material. Online materials are easy to capture by printing pages out or by saving the page as a file. This can lead inexperienced learners to develop a false sense of security in that they have full records of the material but have not studied it in depth. It is important that online learners realise that simply copying the material is not sufficient.

It is good practice to take notes or to annotate print outs. One method is to study the online displays while making notes on a word processor.

The reasons for making notes are the same no matter what the learning methods are. They include:

- identifying the key points of the material;
- assisting the learners to understand the context;
- helping learners to recognise patterns in the materials;
- aiding revision.

Note-taking requires practice, so it is important to provide opportunities for learners to take notes and to reflect on their value.

Good practice includes:

- read before you write;
- summarise what you have read and do not try to record everything;
- keep notes short;
- try to follow a structure and be systematic;
- use consistent abbreviations;
- record source of notes (e.g. URL);
- highlight key/critical points;
- leave space to add points later (e.g. double-spaced notes and/or leave wide margins);
- link notes together (e.g. page headings).

11 Research and searching skills

One of the major features of the World Wide Web is that anyone can create a website and provide information to the world. However, there is no overall quality control of content so users need to be able to judge the quality of the information presented.

Many millions of sites have been created so that you can find information on almost every considerable topic. A key issue is simply to find the content when you want it. It is the equivalent of locating a particular tree in a large forest.

The World Wide Web can therefore be considered as an enormous library of information about almost every subject. However, two critical questions remain:

1. How do you locate the information you want?

2. How do you judge the quality of the information you locate on the World Wide Web?

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Exercise 10

Searching the World Wide Web Duration 15 minutes

How would you develop searching skills?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

Searching skills

The key to finding information on the World Wide Web is the use of search engines. It is important for learners to understand:

- How search engines work (i.e. you are searching a database of web pages not the actual World Wide Web);
- How a directory is different from a search engine;
- How a meta-engine is different from a search engine;
- How to search effectively;
- How to use bookmarks;
- How to use the HISTORY function.

As part of any online learning, opportunities should be provided to compare search engines and different approaches.

Exercise 11

Judging the quality of information Duration 15 minutes

How would you judge the quality of the information on web sites?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

Judging quality

It is not easy to judge the accuracy and quality of information on web sites. Anyone can launch a site and present any information they wish. This is enormously liberating but does not provide users of the information with any assurance of its quality. There is no absolute way of assessing quality but some suggestions are:

- who owns the web site (i.e. are they likely to understand the subject?)
- when was the site last updated? (e.g. information in some areas such as ICT is very volatile so you would expect to see it regularly updated)
- what other sources are available (i.e. do the different sites agree?)
- how was the information collected (e.g. as part of a research project or an individual's opinion?)

As part of any online learning, opportunities should be provided to identify information and assess its value.

12 Analysis

A key learning skill is the ability to analyse information. There are two main approaches:

- Quantitative analysis;
- Qualitative analysis.

Quantitative analysis is about measuring, comparing and judging evidence. This involves considering numerical information in different ways (e.g. drawing graphs, histograms, pie charts and converting numbers into percentages). Spreadsheets provide these types of functions.
They can help you analyse quantitative information by:

- taking the grind out of the arithmetic (e.g. adding up columns of figures accurately)
- creating and employing equations (e.g. carrying out complex mathematics, such as (C8 * Z10)/ (A7 - A11) * 100)
- presenting numerical information in the form of charts and graphs
- allowing information to the modelled (e.g. entering different combinations of data to compare outcomes)

Qualitative analysis can also be assisted by the use of computer applications such as word processors, spreadsheets and databases. Qualitative data is not directly comparable in the same way as numerical information, but it can be presented in a way that assists the learner to make judgements about it. Simply laying information out in a table under appropriate headings can be very helpful. The most basic form of table can be produced on a word processor: more advanced tables can be produced on spreadsheets which are essentially large tables while a database assists organising large volumes of information in a systematic way.

Learning to use computer applications is important to the development of learning skills.

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13 Learning strategies

Most adults develop their approach to learning through traditional methods based on activities in a classroom and directed by a teacher. Online learning is often significantly different from these methods which are considered to be teacher-centred while online approaches are mainly learner-centred. It is a major change for learners to switch from methods/strategies developed over at least 11 years of compulsory education to those required for online learning.

A significant change for tutors, and a major barrier to the development of learning-centred strategies by online learners, may be your own need to alter your approach. It is very difficult to change the methods you have found to be effective over many years but the online environment is very different from a traditional classroom, workshop or seminar. It does not mean that you adopt a laissez-faire approach but it does mean that you assist, facilitate and moderate rather than direct or instruct.

Some learning strategies can be transferred to the online learning environment. However, learners will need to assess their current approaches and identify what could be transferred. It is good practice to provide new learners with exercises to help them to reflect on their previous experience and decide what is appropriate and what they need to develop.

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Exercise 8

Strategies **Duration 20 minutes**

How would you encourage learners to develop appropriate online learning strategies?

Write some notes about this question and turn over the page to read our suggestion.

Notes

Discussion

Learning Strategies

Learners are not instantly going to develop appropriate learning strategies simply by taking part in online courses. They will need to be assisted in comparing their existing approaches to those suitable for online learning. In some cases, learners will discover that they can transfer existing strategies to the new situation. In other cases they will need to develop new strategies.

The table below briefly compares traditional and online strategies.

Traditional	Online
teacher-initiated	learner initiated
reactive in most cases by learner	significant element of pro-action
mainly individual in a large group	individual or in small collaborative groups
centralised assessment	self-assessed mainly

Learners will need opportunities to reflect on their strategies so that they can identify their needs. Reflection should be encouraged by the structure of the learning experiences, online tutors and possibly through assessment. Learning strategies are clearly related to individual preferences so it is critical for learners to reflect on their approaches.

Collaborative learning can help learners to take the initiative and develop a more active approach since it requires them to make judgements and take decisions. Individual exercises where the learner has to design an assignment and then carry it out can help the learner to accept responsibility for their own learning.

Mentors who are successful online learners can assist the process by providing support and guidance.

13 Conclusions

To become a skilled online learner is a substantial task which will not be achieved in a few hours. It requires practical experience within a supportive learning environment. During the design of online learning courses and opportunities, a key consideration needs to be how to help students develop their learning skills.

Online learning covers a wide range of approaches so that the mix of learning skills is likely to vary between different methods. Many are still developing so that the learning skills needed, to be successful, are likely to change. However, this should not be used as a reason for failing to help learning skills to be developed.

Appendices

1. Practical suggestions

- Assess the learners' skills to identify weaknesses which need to be improved;
- Always consider how course activities can be designed to include some aspects of developing learning skills;
- Even very successful learners will find the online learning environment a significant new challenge and will need support;
- People returning to learning will need significant support to develop their learning skills;
- Help learners identify the skills they need to develop;
- Mentors who have previously been successful online learners can provide useful support to new online learners;
- Comparing search approaches in different search engines is useful, as is understanding how different engines work and the value /effectiveness of different techniques;
- Spreadsheets can provide many functions to aid quantitative Analysis;
- Feedback needs to be provided on every occasion;
- Tutors must be proactive;
- Learners need to be encouraged to reflect on their experience and performances -- asking them to keep a learning diary may help them to develop reflective skills;
- Ask the learners to agree a code of conduct for the use of e-mail;
- Ask collaborative learning groups to assign each member with a distinct role and to rotate these roles so that over time everyone gains the opportunity to learn from each one;
- Producing a study timetable can help learners to develop self-management skills;

- Seek every opportunity to provide learners with opportunities to practise their skills;
- Encourage learners to discuss the course with their peers;
- Encourage learners to discuss their progress with their tutor;
- Tutors need to provide detailed feedback;
- Model answers to all assignments will allow learners to assess their own work against a standard and help them to understand what each assignment requires of them;
- Online group exercises take more time than their equivalent traditional form;
- Encourage learners to take notes, annotate or highlight print outs of web pages rather than simply to have large files of web pages;
- opportunities for learners to compare their experience of traditional approaches to learning with online learning methods.

2. Useful contacts

British Association for Open Learning, Pixmore House, Pixmore Avenue, Letchworth, Hertfordshire SG6 1JG www.BAOL.co.uk

Department for Education and Skills www.dfes.gov.uk

National Institute of Adult Continuing Education (NIACE), 21 De Montfort Street, Leicester LE1 7GE www.niace.org.uk

National Training Organisations National Council, 10 Meadowcourt, Amos Road, Sheffield S9 1BX www.nto-nc.org

Open and Distance Learning Quality Council, 16 Park Crescent, London W1H 4AH www.ODLQC.org.uk

Technologies for Training, 32 Castle Street, Guildford, Surrey GU1 3UW www.tft.co.uk

Learndirect www.ufiltd.co.uk

3. Useful publications

Beer, V (2000), The *Web Learning Fieldbook*, Jossey-Bass Pfeiffer

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Palloff, R.M and Pratt, K (1999), *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace: Effective Strategies for the Online Classroom*, Jossey-Bass

Salmon, G (2000), *E-Moderating*, Kogan Page

Slavin, R.E (1990), *Cooperative Learning: Theory, research and practice*, Prentice Hall

Online Learning Skills

Alan Clarke

Online learning skills have a relationship with more general study skills, yet there are specific competences that need to be acquired. This practical guide provides ideas and suggestions for practitioners in developing online learning skills with their learners. Written in an open learning style, the guide includes short exercises and discussion sections on themes including self-management, communication, reading and note-taking, self-assessment and learning strategies.

Related titles of interest from NIACE

Online learning and social exclusion, Alan Clarke, ISBN 1 86201 115 X

ICT – The new basic skill? Alan Clarke and Lisa Englebright, ISBN 1 86201 121 4

A guide to outreach with laptops, Angela Wood, ISBN 1 86201 109 5

How to create effective information and communication technology learning programmes: a guide, Alan Clarke, ISBN 1 86201 054 4

First steps: Initial information and communication technologies events, Alan Clarke, ISBN 1 86201 117 6

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